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Identity formation in professional youth team football environments

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1. Introduction Practitioners, namely professional football coaches, play a significant role in influencing the environment created in a club setting and also in determining the ideal player characteristics (Identity) required by players to progress to higher levels in a club structure. It is argued that a strong, flexible sense of self may be most suitable for young players to make the most of their talents and maximise chances of progression (Nesti & Littlewood, 2009). Historically, the football environment has been characterised as; dominant, authoritarian, masculine, requiring high levels of commitment, discipline and dedication from players (Parker, 2001). Such features may not facilitate the development of a strong and flexible identity (Erikson, 1968). The aim of this study was to gain a critical understanding of ideal player talent characteristics required for progression to the professional environment as well as understand organisational strategies which influence such characteristics.

2. Methods A total of 19 (N = 19) youth development practitioners from 10 (N = 10) professional football clubs across the four major professional leagues undertook semi-structured interviews exploring perceptions of ideal player talent characteristics. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and exposed to notions of content analysis (Côté et al, 1993, Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

3. Results

Table 1 *Ideal player characteristics for progression to the professional environment*

First-order category	Second-order category	General Dimension
Presence	Aura	Player Identity
Deep self-belief		
Self-awareness		
Confidence	Mental Skills	
Mental Skills (general)		
Dedication		
Desire	Psycho-social attributes	
Resilience		
Stable Character		
Love the game		
Take personal responsibility		
Be the best at everything		
Have own agenda		
Meet organisational rules		
Should have outside interests		
Willingness to sacrifice		
Be able to perform at will		

Table 2 *Organisation strategies to promote ideal player characteristics*

First-order category	Second-order category	General Dimension
Hard work environment	Conformity	Organisational strategies contributing to Identity formation
High levels of discipline and professionalism		
Additional responsibilities beyond playing (Jobs)		
Formalised feedback mechanisms on performance		
Treatment of players as individuals		
Staff try to develop ‘good’ people with ‘good’ values	Individual development	
Employ a Sport Psychologist		
Parental Influence		
Socio-economic status	→	Non organisational factors contributing to Identity formation
Characteristics are pre-determined		

4. Discussion and Conclusions Practitioners required players to have a deep self belief, be mentally resilient, have their own agenda and possess emotional stability. Such notions resonate to the work of Erikson (1968) on Identity, and more specifically, knowing who and what you are as an individual. Practitioners employed distinct strategies to promote such characteristics whilst acknowledging some ideal characteristics were predetermined and beyond the influence of the club. Conversely traditional notions of conformity, discipline and professionalism remain prevalent increasing risk of Identity foreclosure (Pepitas, 1978) which may inhibit development of a strong sense of self. Practitioners must be aware that at critical moments such as; transition, injury or deselection, such foreclosure can increase psychological discomfort in players (Nesti, 2004). This may ultimately reduce chances of progression into first team environments.

5. References

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